

Aligning Curriculum, Pedagogy and Assessment for building creative capacity in undergraduate students: A Case Study from the Conservatorium

Don Lebler
Griffith University

Erica McWilliam
Queensland University of Technology

Abstract

Teaching-for-creativity is “rarely an explicit objective of the learning and assessment process” (Jackson, 2006, p.4). In Europe, collaborative research projects have been recently set up to address this lack of acknowledgment or explicitness. Australian universities lag behind in this respect. However, Australian HEIs are now showing increasing commitment to creative capacity building as an outcome of undergraduate teaching. Recent research shows that Australian award-winning academic teachers value creative learning outcomes for their undergraduate students but are often frustrated in their efforts to achieve them by a culture that narrowly prescribes what is to be taught and how it is to be assessed. They point to “the lack of challenging assessments”, “standardised” or “didactic, content driven and controlled processes” and the continuing predominance of the “transmission of information” model, as significant obstacles. These are issues of mis-alignment. Such findings point to the need for models of teaching and learning that demonstrate quite precisely how it is possible to align curriculum, pedagogy and assessment.

The Bachelor of Popular Music Program at the Conservatorium of Music in Queensland is one example of an aligned program. Below is a synthesis of the principles and practices that unify the curriculum, pedagogy and assessment around student ownership of learning. Key issues include the development of a curriculum that addresses the range of activities that popular musicians generally engage with; employment of a pedagogy that acknowledges the learning-centred practices of popular musicians; and the provision an assessment regime that includes self- and peer assessment along with assessment by staff. These elements combine to enhance students’ abilities to be self-monitoring and self-directing in ‘creating value’.

Introduction

With global trends towards sustainable economic growth, policymakers worldwide are now looking to creativity, innovation and human talent as the engines of future productivity and social dynamism. The trend to value creative and relational capacities over narrow instrumental skills is also reflected in the UK, with employers seeking “multi-competent graduates” (Yorke, 2006, p.2) who have “high level expertise emphasising

discovery and exploiting the discoveries of others through market related intelligence and the application of personal skills” (p.5).

Underneath these trends is a more fundamental recognition that productivity in the 21st century requires “a deep vein of creativity that is constantly renewing itself”, (NCEE, 2007). This sort of creativity is not limited to the creative industries but includes all those employed in a wide variety of professional work, including computing, engineering, architecture, science, education, arts and multimedia. All university graduates, as potential future ‘creatives’ (Cunningham, 2006, Florida, 2002, Pink 2005), will be performing work that is less focused on routine problem-solving and more focused on new social relationships, novel challenges and the synthesising of ‘big picture’ scenarios. It is unsurprising therefore that of the qualities employers are seeking in graduates, “imagination/ creativity” are on top of the list (The Pedagogy for Employability Group, 2006).

The burgeoning interest in creative capacity building in higher education is both an outcome of new imperatives in professional work, and a response to evidence about the new ways that young people learn (Hartman *et al*, 2005; Seely Brown, 2006). A recent report issued by the European University Association (EUA, 2007) directs the sector to consider ‘creativity’ as central to their research and their teaching:

The complex questions of the future will not be solved “by the book”, but by creative, forward-looking individuals and groups who are not afraid to question established ideas and are able to cope with the insecurity and uncertainty that this entails. (p.6)

The problem is not that creativity is absent but that it is omnipresent and yet not taken seriously (Jackson, 2006) as a generic approach, in that teaching-for-creativity is “rarely an explicit objective of the learning and assessment process” (p.4). In Europe, collaborative research projects have been recently set up to address this lack of acknowledgment or explicitness (see Jeffrey, 2006). Australian universities lag behind in this respect. However, Australian HEIs are showing increasing commitment to creative capacity building as an outcome of undergraduate teaching. Indeed, in 2006, 75% of Australia’s universities named ‘creative’ learning outcomes in their teaching and learning plans and graduate attribute lists (McWilliam & Dawson, 2008). Yet despite its ubiquity in higher education discourse, creativity is yet to be made explicit as a strategy for, or approach to, practices of learning and teaching.

A recent Carrick Institute sponsored National Creativity Showcase (<http://www.creativityshowcase.qut.edu.au/>) identified thirty exemplary ‘creative’ teachers in 21 Australian universities. What became evident as an outcome of this Showcase is that teaching *for* creativity does occur in Australian undergraduate teaching just as it does in the UK, and that it is not just found in the creative arts but across a number of disciplinary areas. However, the findings also show that there is little evidence of teaching *for* creativity being embedded as a set of aligned and coherent course-wide, course long practices. Without scaling up of this sort, creative capacity as a learning outcome remains dependent on ‘one-off’ pioneering work being done by an individual teacher or small group of teachers with the passion and skills necessary to such engagement.

Australian award-winning academic teachers value creative learning outcomes for their undergraduate students but are often frustrated in their efforts to achieve them by a culture that narrowly prescribes what is to be taught and how it is to be assessed (McWilliam & Dawson, 2007) . They point to “the lack of challenging assessments”, “standardised” or “didactic, content driven and controlled processes” and the continuing predominance of the “transmission of information” model, as significant obstacles. Put bluntly, these are issues of mis-alignment. Such findings point to the need for models of teaching and learning that demonstrate quite precisely how it is possible to align curriculum, pedagogy and assessment.

A ‘Case’ of Alignment

The Bachelor of Popular Music Program (BPM) at the Conservatorium of Music in Queensland is an outcome of a conscious attempt to unify the curriculum, pedagogy and assessment around student ownership of learning. Students starting the BPM program since 2003 have been surveyed about the ways they have learned music before starting their university studies, and findings have been reported in detail in Lebler (2007, 2008b), Burt, Lancaster, Lebler, Carey, & Hitchcock (2007) and Lebler and Carey (2008). The learning behaviours of BPM students before coming to university have produced valuable attributes that can be acknowledged and accommodated in the program structures and processes. The curriculum includes a range of activities that are present in informal popular music practice, and accommodates the musical preferences and practices of students rather than those of teachers. The pedagogy recognises the abilities of students to interact positively in a variety of dimensions and rejects the notion that the teachers should be the primary source of knowledge, in control of the learning activities at a micro level. The assessment includes all participants as active players and acknowledges the abilities of students to take a meaningful role in an activity that has a substantial influence on the nature of student learning. In all of this, collaboration is encouraged and creativity can be exercised. Students’ creative submissions are of their own choosing, under their own direction and are assessed against the standards of their style. Diversity is evident in these submissions and is celebrated. These principles and practices unify the curriculum, pedagogy and assessment around student ownership of learning.

Curriculum

There is now a well-developed understanding of how popular music is learned outside of institutional settings. A Google Scholar search for “popular music+learning’ yielded 20,500 results on May 7 2008, and a search on <http://highwire.org> (Stanford University Libraries) for ‘popular music learning’ in HighWire-hosted scholarly journals yielded 9344 results. It often includes solitary activity, and when a community of practice is available, it will usually consist of peers rather than adults or ‘master-musicians’, with the transmission of knowledge and skills occurring between learners rather than at the direction of an adult teacher (Green, 2008). Listening to recordings and copying them both play an important role, as does the formation of bands, even in the early stages of musical development. Learning often occurs in the company of others and includes peer-directed learning, self-directed learning and group learning (Green, 2001). The prior learning experiences of BPM students are representative of this popular music approach. A recent study reported that while most had some private music tuition, a majority had fewer than 50 lessons and 20% had fewer than ten, whereas almost all classical music students in the study had more than fifty lessons (Carey & Lebler, 2008).

For BPM students, their own opinions, audience reactions, the views of bandmates and friends and audio recording were all used more frequently than the views of teachers as sources of feedback on musical achievements and progress. Less than one tenth of BPM students report being active in only one category of music making activity (like composition, vocals, guitar, drums etc) and almost three quarters are active in three or more areas (Lebler & Carey, 2008).

The real issue for music education is how these existing skills are utilized in formal settings (Folkestad, 2007). In the BPM example, the performance of popular music is at the heart of the curriculum. Although learning *about* popular music is valued, it is the *creation* of music in the recording studio that is most highly valued by students (Lebler, 2007). Students learn about the history and analysis of popular music, while at the same time they study audio engineering and production along with a range of other courses dealing with the music business, information technology and creative music technologies, and this is all under the direction of teachers. However, instead of the teaching agenda being strongly focussed on one or sometimes two specific music-making activities, having performance lessons, performing mandated repertoire in assigned ensembles and working under the specific direction of teachers as is usually the case in a conservatoire, the major study for BPM students is more diverse. Major study encourages *integration of skills and application of knowledge learnt* in other courses, students recording their own original music under their own direction, with people of their own choosing (and not always limited to their fellow students), usually with several aspects to their personal contributions that might include compositional, performance and technical aspects.

Pedagogy

Rather than replicating the prevailing model of teaching and learning in conservatoires and simply substitute popular music as the content area, the BPM focus is on engaging students across all year levels as members of a community of practice. The main pedagogical work in the BPM is *the management of a learning system* rather than the provision of knowledge and assessment and the teaching of skills (McWilliam, Lebler, & Taylor, 2007). The program's major study requires students to report their planning for the semester in a proposal that is assessed by staff who provide feedback; it provides access to structured (and less formal) feedback on work-in-progress from peers as well as an opportunity to provide feedback in formal work-in-progress feedback sessions; it provides easy access to a wide range of professional recording facilities and involves students as both performers and recording technologists, providing access to the benefits that derive from the opportunity to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of one's own recorded work; it delivers classes from industry practitioners to illustrate potential outcomes and encourage consideration of diverse career options; and crucially, it involves students in the meaningful assessment of the work of their peers, their marks contributing to their peers' grades and their performance of this activity being assessed by teachers.

Assessment

It is interesting to consider why it is that relatively traditional assessment methods are normal in conservatoires, with a high incidence of student performances being assessed by staff, often in a recital framework and usually focussed on a single aspect of an individual's performance. It is certainly not always because assessment is limited by

institutional regulation. For example, the assessment policy of the host University for the BPM program states that assessment “inevitably shapes the learning that takes place, that is, what students learn and how they learn it, and should reflect closely the purposes and aims of the course of study” (Griffith University, 2007). It should be criteria based rather than norm referenced, and may include individual or collaborative achievement or both. Assessment methods can include self-assessment, peer assessment and assessment by staff.

Assessment processes should reflect the kinds of attributes we would like our students to be able to display after graduation. Because so much of the major study is self-directed, students have to plan their activities for themselves. Teachers provide feedback on this planning as part of their assessment of students’ creative work proposals early in the semester. A reflective journal about the creative process and its associated learning is submitted at the end of the semester and teachers provide feedback and marks. However, if *an ability to be self-auditing* is a desired outcome of a course, at least some active assessment by students should be included. BPM students submit their self-assessment at the end of each semester, and assessment panels award 10% of the course mark for the quality of this self-assessment. These panels consist of seven or eight students from all year levels, with a range of musical preferences and specialisms, and one staff member. Each panellist provides written feedback and marks, which are aggregated and returned to the submitting students. The quality of each student’s performance in this assessment process is assessed by staff and contributes 20% of the course mark, a clear message to students as to the value placed on this activity.

This combination of assessment practices encourages the development of the abilities the BPM program intends to develop in its graduates. It encourages students to plan their work, to reflect on its strengths and weaknesses, to engage with the work of their peers and provide meaningful feedback, and to develop the inclination and ability to take a range of points of view into account when dealing with the feedback they receive. Any concerns about students’ ability to make well-founded judgements and produce valid marks have been put to rest through a continuing study of the marks produced by assessment panels compared with the marks awarded by the staff member who would be solely responsible for assessing in the prevailing conservatoire model. These studies (Lebler, 2006, 2008a) indicate that over period of seven semesters, almost all marks produced by assessment panels fall within five percent of those awarded by staff. In addition to marks, the panels produce a lot of feedback, averaging over 600 words per track submitted in recent semesters (Lebler, 2008b).

The above brief case study is not presented as a definitive one, nor a template for others to follow. Alignment of curriculum pedagogy and assessment is always a work-in-progress, challenging teachers, students and academic managers alike to ‘unlearn’ old practices (some of which may have served them well in the past), in order to engage students in the sort of creative thinking and doing that will continue to serve their interests in the 21st century.

References

Burt, R., Lancaster, H., Lebler, D., Carey, G., & Hitchcock, M. (2007, July). *Shaping the tertiary music curriculum: what can we learn from different contexts?* Paper

- presented at the Music in Australian Tertiary Institutions: Issues for the 21st Century, Brisbane.
- Carey, G., & Lebler, D. (2008, 15- 20 July). *Prior learning of conservatoire students: A classical music perspective*. Paper to be presented at the 17th International Seminar of the International Society for Music Education Commission for the Education of the Professional Musician Commission, Spilamberto, Italy.
- Cunningham, S. (2006). *What price a creative economy?* Platform Papers: Quarterly Essay on the Performing Arts 9, July.
- European University Association (2007). *Creativity in Higher Education: Report on the EUA Creativity project 2006-2007*. Brussels: The European University Association.
- Florida, R. (2002). *The rise of the creative class*. New York: Basic Books.
- Folkestad, G. (2007). Here, There and Everywhere. In G. Folkestad (Ed.), *A Decade of research in Music Education* (pp. 7–25). Malmö: Malmö Academy of Music.
- Green, L. (2001). *How popular musicians learn: a way ahead for music education*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate.
- Green, L. (2008). *Music, Informal Learning and the School: A New Classroom Pedagogy*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Griffith University, (2007). *Assessment Policy*. Retrieved March 19 2008. from <http://www62.gu.edu.au/policylibrary.nsf>.
- Hartman, J., Moskal, P. & Dziuban, C. (2005). Preparing the Academy of Today for the Learner of Tomorrow, in *Educating the Net Generation: An Educause e-Book*, Chapter 6. Available online at: www.educause.edu/educatingthenetgen (accessed 8 July 2007).
- Jackson, N. (2006). Imagining a Different World, in N. Jackson, M. Oliver, M. Shaw, J. Wisdom (Eds) *Developing creativity in higher education: An imaginative curriculum*. London: Routledge, pp.1-9.
- Lebler, D. (2006, July 10-14). *3D assessment: looking through a learning lens*. Paper presented at the New models for educating professional musicians in the twenty-first century: proceedings of the 16th International Seminar of the Commission for the Education of the Professional Musician (CEPROM), Hanoi National Conservatory of Music.
- Lebler, D. (2007). Student-as-master? Reflections on a learning innovation in popular music pedagogy *International Journal of Music Education*, 25(3), 205–221.
- Lebler, D. (2008a). Perspectives on assessment in the learning of music. In D. Bennett & M. Hannan (Eds.), *Inside, Outside, Downside Up: Conservatoire Training and Musicians' Work* (pp. 181–193). Perth: Black Swan Press.
- Lebler, D. (2008b). Popular music pedagogy: peer-learning in practice *Music Education Research*, 10(2), 193–213.
- Lebler, D., & Carey, G. (2008, 15- 20 July). *Prior learning of conservatoire students: A popular music perspective*. Paper to be presented at the 17th International Seminar of the International Society for Music Education Commission for the Education of the Professional Musician Commission, Spilamberto, Italy.
- McWilliam, E. and Dawson, S. (2008). Teaching for creativity: Towards sustainable and replicable pedagogical practice, *Higher Education*, Online: <http://www.springerlink.com/content/g518p92082x3l221/>.
- McWilliam, E. and Dawson, S. (2007). *Understanding creativity: A survey of 'creative' academic teachers'*. http://www.carrickinstitute.edu.au/carrick/webdav/site/carricksite/users/siteadmin/public/fellowships_associatefellow_report_ericamcwilliam_may07.pdf

- McWilliam, E., Lebler, D., & Taylor, P. G. (2007, June 17–21). From passive consumers to active prod-users: students as co-teachers in a popular music program. Paper presented at the 13th International Conference on Thinking, Norrköping, Sweden. <http://www.ep.liu.se/ecp/021/vol1/>
- NCEE (2007). Tough Choices or Tough Times: The Report of the New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce. National Center on Education and the Economy. www.skillscommission.org
- Pink, D.H. (2005). *A Whole New Mind*. New York: Penguin.
- Seely Brown, J. (2006). New Learning Environments for the 21st century: Exploring the edge, *Change*, Sept-Oct, 38 (5), 18-25.
- The Pedagogy for Employability Group, (2006). Pedagogy for Employability, in M. Yorke (Ed.) *Learning and Employability Series One*, The Higher Education Academy – employability@heacademy.ac.uk
- Yorke, M. (2006). Employability in higher education: what it is – what it is not, in M. Yorke (Ed.) *Learning and Employability Series One*, The Higher Education Academy – employability@heacademy.ac.uk